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Elder abuse

Elder abuse has been defined as a single or repeated act—or lack of appropriate action—occurring in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust but which causes harm or distress to an older person.¹ Such abuse generally falls into the following categories: physical abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, financial or material abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect.² Like domestic violence, elder abuse has long been perceived as a private matter, one that is hidden from public view.

Health workers can play a key role in identifying elder abuse during primary care, mental health, or emergency visits. But addressing the problem through policy, planning, and programming requires a firmer knowledge base: more information on the prevalence, characteristics, and impacts of such abuse. Also important are stronger laws and effective enforcement.²

Key facts

- Elder abuse occurs in both developed and developing countries but often goes unreported, making its true prevalence difficult to assess.
- Incipient data (from five high-income countries over the last decade) suggest that rates of elder abuse range from 4% to 6% if physical, psychological and financial abuse and neglect are included.²
- The impact of abuse can be especially serious for seniors, who tend to be physically weaker and more vulnerable than younger adults.
- Because seniors often depend on caretakers or family members for their care and sometimes for financial support, escaping an abusive situation may be particularly challenging.

Links

World Report on Violence and Health (2002)
http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/index.html

References

¹ What is elder abuse? *Action on Elder Abuse Bulletin*, 1995, 11 (May-June).

² Krug EG et al., eds. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2002.